



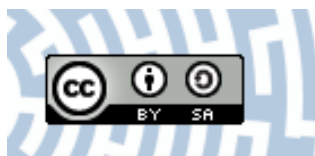
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## A Solitary Man in the Space of Genocide

**ABSTRACT:** In this essay, I discuss a particular narrative structure manifest in contemporary genocide narratives, a structure based on a distinctive presence of a first-person – usually male – narrator, who describes his experiences and reflections born in the course of his peregrinations to sites of mass extermination. Rooting my research in geocriticism, I explore ties between space and memory, which allows me to distinguish several levels of analyzed texts, tending towards metaphysical generalizations of nihilistic or patriotic nature. I apply the said analytical categories to my study of selected passages of Dawid Szkoła’s and Przemysław Dakowicz’s respective essays.

**KEYWORDS:** genocide, historical tourism, the Shoah, the Holocaust, historical politics, essay, reportage, geopoetics

The eponymous protagonist of W.G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz*, gradually coming to understand his own past, embarks upon a journey to Terezín (Theresienstadt), where his mother was deported during the war. The photographs illustrating the novel suggest, however, that the journey had actually been made by the writer himself: his face is reflected in a snapshot of a shop window in the small Czech town. In fact, the whole bulk of the prose by the author of *The Rings of Saturn* consists of his travel notes, intertwined with his interpretations of texts that he reads in relation to the space he presents. The protagonist’s visit to the former concentration camp Ghetto Theresienstadt is not only a significant stage in the process of the recognition of his own past, but also, arguably, a paradigmatic prototype of the literary tourism of the Shoah and other genocides.<sup>1</sup> The writer must experience the space of genocide, see the landscape, feel the sense of otherness of such places and their uniqueness, and become familiar with their

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<sup>1</sup> W.G. SEBALD: *Austerlitz*. Trans. A. BELL. New York 2001.



present-day states – which, as a rule, turn out to be the cause of disappointment. Transformed into museums (as was the case with Fort Breedonk, where Jean Améry was tortured), deserted, or frightening visitors with dilapidated walls of crumbling buildings, such spaces often emanate sorrowful neglect.

A solitary journey to genocide sites, usually made by a male traveler, has become an important element of the (geo)poetics of contemporary texts.<sup>2</sup> This is how one could read the essayistic reportages by Martin Pollack, who travels Poland, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Austria to trace the tainted landscapes – oftentimes concealing forgotten mass graves<sup>3</sup> – and to solve family mysteries related to the Nazi involvements of his relatives.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, worth noting are at least two more cases (perhaps not as consistent as the books by the Austrian historical reporter), both of which, by and large, are related to postmemory, and both of which are attempts at connecting the reflection upon genocide with the issue of one's own identity. Georges Didi-Huberman visits Birkenau in order to read the space of the camp in the context of four photographs taken by the members of Sonderkommando. His reflections upon the status of the images (presented more broadly in his work *Images malgré tout*) intertwine with the passages reflecting the process of the recognition of the space of the camp, but also with the philosopher's reminiscences on his grandparents who were murdered there.<sup>5</sup> In turn, in his memoir, Włodek Goldkorn mainly focuses on the presentation of the history of his childhood and youth, which period of his life he spent in Katowice and then in Warsaw, a city he had to leave in 1968, when he was forced to emigrate. His autobiography concludes with descriptions of a series of peregrinations to the most infamous death camps in the territories of Poland. The journalist visits these places with the view to exploring the spaces of the Shoah, thus becoming a pilgrim of sorts, a devotee, who wishes to gain the first-hand experience of the presence of the unique sites.<sup>6</sup>

Although in Sebald's, Pollack's, Didi-Huberman's, and Goldkorn's accounts numerous differences are easy to observe, it is what they have in common that is far more important. Some of them emphasize biographical, others family-related, entanglements: Sebald and Pollack stress these in relation to the perpetrators of the crimes; Didi-Huberman and Goldkorn – in relation to their victims. All of them, however, acknowledge the need for memory, which is

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<sup>2</sup> See E. RYBICKA: *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich*. Kraków 2014, especially the chapter dedicated to the topographies of history: "Topografie historii: miejsce pamięć, literatura" dedicated, among others, to "locations carved out of memory."

<sup>3</sup> M. POLLACK: *Kontaminierte Landschaften*. Residenz Verlag 2014.

<sup>4</sup> M. POLLACK: *The Dead Man in the Bunker. Discovering My Father*. Trans. W. HOBSON. London 2006.

<sup>5</sup> G. DIDI-HUBERMAN: *Écorces*. Paris 2011.

<sup>6</sup> W. GOLDKORN: *Il bambino nella neve*. Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore 2016.

kept alive, among others, owing to the existence of a variety of means, including the visual media.

In each author's case, the narrative is shaped by the journey: translocations, visits to various genocide sites are not simply important motifs of their stories, but also serve as factors organizing their narratives. One should add that in each case the journey is rather lonely; it is a peregrination emphasizing solitary reflections of the author rather than the dialog, communal experiences of a whole group, or diverse points of view.<sup>7</sup>

From where does the orientation towards the individualization of the narrative stem? Certainly, one of the most important contexts of such a choice is the modern epistemology, which has imposed upon the intellectuals a vision of a self as an isolated subject, who gets to know the reality on his or her own with the view to presenting the effects of the complex cognitive process to the audience only after this reality has been studied and the findings have been recorded. Such an epistemological model also determines the narrative situation – one dominated by the isolated voice of the narrator. It is then hardly surprising that a certain distance and an all-pervasive sense of solitude constitute quite obvious traits of the cognitive and narrative situation in question. In the cases of the mentioned authors, the solitude of the journey allows them to more clearly emphasize their own affects, without the interference of the experiences of any other individual, who might bring his or her own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions into the discourse. One should perhaps note that such an isolation is two-dimensional: it marks one's distance towards one's own community (the community from which the protagonist comes), simultaneously signifying the divide between the narrator and the people living in the place to which he travels – people with whom he tends not to converse, but whom he often keenly observes. As I have already stressed, the communicative distance renders the narrator's affects more profound, but is also conducive to the sharpening of his or her overall capability of general, historiosophical, or metaphysical reflection.

In this article, I intend to reflect upon the presence of a similar structure in several passages from essays written by Dawid Szkoła and Przemysław

<sup>7</sup> Such a mode of the narrativization of the journey to genocide sites does not have to be a rule. A good example of a more polyphonic story is the book by Marianne HIRSCH and Leo SPITZER: *Ghosts of Home. The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*. Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2010, dedicated to several journeys made together to the hometown of Marianne Hirsch's parents. See also: A. UBERTOWSKA: *Holokaust. Auto(tanato)grafie*. Warszawa 2014. An interesting case of a similar journey is described in the book *Mūsiškiai; Kelionė Su Priešu*, whose central theme is the coming to terms with the Lithuanian's contribution to the Shoah – see: R. VANAGATITĖ, E. ZUROFF: *Mūsiškiai; Kelionė Su Priešu*. Vilnius 2016. In this context, also the reports from the travels to genocide sites written by women writers are worth mentioning; see, for instance: A. JANKO: *Mała Zagłada*. Kraków 2015 (published in English as: *A Little Annihilation. A Memoir*. Trans. P. BOEHM. New York–London–Amsterdam 2020); N. FRESCO: *La Mort des Juifs*. Paris 2008.

Dakowicz. The first writer has published three books of essays. In the most recent of the three, Szkoła's experiences of reading texts by a number of writers from the region of Polish Galicia have been complemented with his accounts of his journeys to Ukraine. Owing to this, an interesting relation develops between the essayistic, reading-based reflections on the Shoah (and other cases of extermination, including colonial genocides) and the inscription of the author's own presence in the spaces in which the annihilation of the Jews took place (such as Brody, Chernivtsi, or Buchach).

Likewise, in the two volumes of his *Afazja polska* (The Polish aphasia) and in his *Kwatera zmartwychwstałej pamięci* (The quarters of the resurrected memory), the second author, Przemysław Dakowicz, largely relies upon his (frequently affective) reading of a variety of historical sources, concerning mostly the extermination of Poles during the Second World War and in the Stalinist era. He, too, complements his reading experience with the records of his journeys: journeys to Łączka (a graveyard where, after long negotiations, the exhumation of the remains of the victims of the post-war terror recently took place) and to the sites of the Nazi extermination of the Polish intellectuals in the region of Pomerania, which genocide was effected by the Germans in the fall of 1939.

It is on the basis of the analyses of the essays by these two writers that I wish to explore the figures of the knowledge of genocide that are adopted by authors – and accepted by audiences – today. I am interested in the memory-based legitimization of the knowledge about the genocides, in the affects related to experiencing such memory/-ies or such knowledge, and, finally, in the metaphysical conclusions that the authors draw from their affective and cognitive journeys. An important element of the study of these narratives is the in-depth diagnosis of the first-person narrative situation – a situation dominated by the male narrator, who discloses his emotional states, his despair, his melancholia, sometimes his sickness, as if such a mode of storytelling were to expose a subject capable of an adequate incorporation of the knowledge about genocide, of experiencing this knowledge, and of drawing conclusions out of the experience.

Before I pass on to the description of the works by Szkoła and Dakowicz, in the first part of my article I shall dedicate some space to three processual stages, elementary to the discourse of the genocide: memory, knowledge, and historiosophy. Then, I shall concentrate on three categories serving the purpose of the description of the structure of the projects under investigation, namely, the categories of space, affect, and history. Finally, I shall discuss the nihilism of Dawid Szkoła and the symbolism of Przemysław Dakowicz as two different historiosophical projects, both firmly anchored in particular spaces.



## Memory – Knowledge – Historiosophy

Every significant historical event passes through a few steps of literary assimilation and processing. In the first stage, the participants of the event attempt to record their own experiences, to perpetuate that which they themselves harbor in their memories, or that which came to be an experience of their dear ones. This stage – the one closest to the historical event – is the stage of memory. The proximity of memory and the event, however, does not have to be solely temporal in character; after all, one frequently needs many years to develop a distance necessary to be able to process one's experiences and mould them into a literary form. The second stage of the literary processing of a historical event may be described as the stage of knowledge: a stage often as close to the event as the stage of memory, but one assuming a certain cognitive distance. It is so because rather than sharing one's own experiences, in this stage one presents a synthesis of other people's stories. Insofar as memory may be tantamount to a simple report of one's own lived experiences, knowledge requires an attempt to explain the event and to pass a moral judgment, whose intensity may be even greater than that of the judgments passed in the course of the first stage. Finally, the third stage, which may be described as metaphysical or historiosophical, raises the question concerning the sense of the historical event, thereby attempting to locate the fact in broader historical narratives, within the frames of which it is possible to determine complex relations among a variety of factors responsible for the course of history or for the structure of the historical process.

Each of the three stages observes its own conventions. Memory, especially autobiographic memory, requires trust in the first-person story testifying to the authenticity of the presented facts. In turn, problems related to knowledge were perhaps most fully addressed by scholars involved in narratological research, who analyzed differences between the narrator's and the protagonist's knowledge,<sup>8</sup> as well as by the researchers invested in the Foucauldian archeology of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> At this level, it is possible to ask questions concerning the construction of the discourse and its legitimacy. In the case of geopoetics, the category of multifocalization,<sup>10</sup> as proposed by Bertrand Westphal, is of

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<sup>8</sup> T. TODOROV: "Les Catégories du récit littéraire." *Communications* 1966, no. 8. See also: T. TODOROV, J. KESTNER: "The Categories of Literary Narrative." *Papers on Language & Literature* 1980 (Winter), vol. 16, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> M. FOUCAULT: *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. SHERIDAN SMITH. New York 2010.

<sup>10</sup> See: B. WESTPHAL: *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces*. Trans. R.T. TALLY Jr. New York 2011, p. 114. See also: E. RYBICKA: *Geopoetyka...*, p. 71. Another important concept is that of polysensoriness, which stresses the activation of different senses in the experience of a traveler. See also: D. SOSNOWSKA: "W stronę nowego multikulturalizmu: polska i ukraińska literacka oraz

particular importance, as it stresses the multiplicity of perspectives that need to be taken into account in the course of geocritical analysis of a textual outlook upon the visited space. Finally, historiosophy necessitates the inclusion of a variety of abstract objects – which often become subjects of predications on history, human, and other grand categories – in the historical narration.

Of course, memory, knowledge, and historiosophy can never function in full isolation. On the contrary: they fuse into one another at every instance of representation. Yet, simultaneously, for each text it is possible to determine which of the three levels is the dominant one. Such a diagnosis, admittedly, is not always unproblematic. In the case of the Holocaust and other genocides, memory plays such an important role particularly because the perpetrators intended to erase the genocide from it, to obliterate not only the victims, but also the witnesses, to make sure that no one would know what happened to the exterminated people. The duty of remembering is therefore an extension of the imperative to pass onto others the knowledge of what is happening – or what once happened – in closed, secret, clandestine camps and other spaces of genocide, of which no one is, or was, supposed to know.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the case of genocides, memory plays a privileged role; it is therefore hardly surprising that many cultural texts take on the guise of direct memory or postmemory, and that the narrators meticulously stage the immediacy of the experience which, in fact, was never theirs. Such a situation often occurs in texts attempting to intercept the trauma, to show their protagonists as hurt on account of the fact of their belonging to a community that at some point experienced historical abuse. What purpose does such a shift serve? A testimony based on one's own memory is legitimized as an experience: an authentic, lived experience of the author. In comparison, neither knowledge about a historical event, nor metaphysical speculation receive such a legitimization. Inscribing a given text into the paradigm of memory allows one, therefore, to amplify the rhetorical effect of one's own experience, replete with powerful affects, or informed with the tangibility of non-mediated encounters with extreme situations.

The brief overview of the constellation of categories provides the frame of reference that I shall now apply in my interpretation of a few texts on genocide which were published in the recent years, and address, primarily, the genocides perpetrated during the Second World War. The temporal distance between the event and the completion of the narrative practically disqualifies the discourse

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fotograficzna narracja na temat innych w Galicji po roku 1989." In: J. WIERZEJSKA, D. SOSNOWSKA, A. MOLISAK (eds.): *Turystyka i polityka. Ideologie współczesnych opowieści o przestrzeniach*. Warszawa 2017, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> I. KERTÉSZ: "The Language of the Exile." Trans. I. SANDERS. *The Guardian* 2002 (October 19th). The Hungarian writer uses the category of "the fear of forgetting," permeated with the metaphysics of anxiety that the desire of the perpetrators to keep the Holocaust secret will be fulfilled. Similar problems were raised by Primo Levi and, earlier, by Tadeusz Borowski.



of the continuity of memory. Therefore, the perspective one can adopt is – at best – the perspective of the intergenerational inheritance of trauma.<sup>12</sup>

My close analyses focus upon selected passages from the essays by Dariusz Szkoła and by Przemysław Dakowicz, whose respective texts concentrate on the reading of memoirs and testimonies, but are complemented with the records of the authors' own travels to the sites of genocide. Although in general the two writers are more unlike than alike, I shall attempt to emphasize some of the elements of the immanent poetics of their respective prose writings that both of them share. The unique narrative structure they both employ reflects the poetics of their outlooks on genocides and the ways to apply the knowledge – and this seems far more important than the events the essayists present, or even the positions that each of them adopts with respect to these events.

### The Nihilism of the Genocide in Dawid Szkoła's Essays

In his first two books – titled, respectively, *Eseje* (Essays) and *Ciemno, coraz ciemniej* (It is dark, and getting darker) – Dawid Szkoła indeed dedicates much space to genocide. He is interested both in the colonial genocides – from Hernán Cortés and the Spanish conquest of Mexico to the late 19th-century stage of the colonization of Africa, when intensive exploitation led to the extreme cases of the extermination of major groups of population<sup>13</sup> – and in the Holocaust, which he explores quite extensively, focusing mostly on the prose of such authors as Imre Kertész, Elie Wiesel, or Jean Améry (Hans Mayer). Unlike it is the case with many other philosophizing essayists, Szkoła's interest does not lie in the extensiveness of the scope of research on genocide, in the multiplicity of individual events, or even in the complex frame of cause-and-effect relations leading to mass extermination. Rather than that, he concentrates upon fragments featuring extreme situations, illustrating his a priori thesis concerning evil, nothingness, and the destructive tendencies in a human being, which jointly render history no more and no less than a murderous error. Such assumptions mean that it is the elements of the genocide discourse representing extreme dehumanization that Szkoła will find particularly attractive – as is, for instance, the case with the essayist's reaction to Elie Wiesel's *Night*, in which the author narrates the death of his own father and paints the distance he himself develops with respect to him

<sup>12</sup> Dakowicz attempts to tie his own writing with the category of postmemory; see: P. DAKOWICZ: *Obcowanie. Manifesty i eseje*. Warszawa 2014, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup> In this context, reportages and historical books enjoying a widely recognized status are of particular importance to Szkoła's work – especially Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* and Sven Lindqvist's *Exterminate All the Brutes*.

as a son no longer caring for anything else but his own survival and avoidance of pain.<sup>14</sup> Another example of such a tendency in Szkoła's writing could be his referencing Paul Celan's poetry and biography, manifest especially in quoting the poet's words concerning the death of his mother, who was not meant to age.<sup>15</sup>

Szkoła's interest in genocide, however, does not constitute an autonomous theme in his writing; rather, it stems from the author's need to find an illustration for his own nihilist reflections. The writer is fascinated with the annihilating power of history, which causes destruction and death of innocent people. Szkoła's metaphysics of history finds its full expression in his book *Galicyskie żywoty. Opowieści o stracie, doli i pograniczu* (The Galician lives. Stories of the loss, fate, and borderlands),<sup>16</sup> consisting of his interpretations of lives and works of Joseph Conrad, Joseph Roth, Paul Celan, and Jerzy Stempowski, as well as of his account of his journey to western Ukraine, during which the author visits such places as Brody, Pidkamin, Ternopil, Chernivtsi, and Buchach.

The two intertwining narrations – that of an essay and that of a reportage – are fused into one by virtue of their common metaphysical perspective. It is so because Szkoła reads books and observes Ukraine with the same goal in mind: to reinforce his already strong convictions on the nature of history, the nature of life, which is always fragile, always endangered, and, eventually, always destroyed. Let us quote Szkoła's key declaration concerning his journeys, but also relating to passages he interprets:

In my journeys I would always choose to visit provincial towns in order to observe ordinary life, this vicious circle of birth and death, up close. I was hoping that no detail of it will escape me, that I would see its essence, missing nothing. (p. 221)<sup>17</sup>

As his notes indicate, Szkoła primarily *watches*: he observes people, but rarely engages them in a conversation. Therefore, in fact, since all other channels of information have practically been blocked, he must limit his phenomenology of human existence to vision alone – preferably, to the immediate vision of the essence. It would be hard to take such a gesture of cognitive self-improvement seriously, especially when it results in the narrative being filled in with descriptions in which it is only too easy to leave out the individual – complete with his or her singular fates and history – to save time and to arrive at a reflection of the highest possible level of generality faster.

<sup>14</sup> D. SZKOŁA: *Eseje*. Kraków 2015.

<sup>15</sup> D. SZKOŁA: *Ciemno, coraz ciemniej*. Wrocław 2017.

<sup>16</sup> D. SZKOŁA: *Galicyskie żywoty. Opowieści o stracie, doli i pograniczu*. Łódź 2018. All quotations in the article refer to this edition of Szkoła's text.

<sup>17</sup> Unless marked otherwise, all passages quoted in the text of the article have been translated by Paweł Jędrzejko.

In Szkoła's travel notes we will not find any conversations, any individual histories, because, as it seems, the author neither knows them, nor is interested in them. The writer observes people, the Ukrainians, only to see what he already finds familiar and what, allegedly, is intensified by the lethargy of the country in crisis, an apathy hard to remedy. It is worth adding that the adoption of such a perspective determines the pattern of power relations and inequalities inscribed into the narrative: the tourist's gaze is filtered through the lens of the sense of superiority and contempt with respect to the local people, who – busy with mundane chores, running quotidian errands, or concerned about their daily “business” – have no time for the metaphysical reflection which could allow them to see their own position from a distance.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, Ziemowit Szczerek published his *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje* (Mordor is coming to devour us all), a book dedicated to Polish tourism in Ukraine<sup>19</sup> and addressing some of the typical elements of travel discourse, which include the (postcolonial) melancholia of the borderlands, the need to reinforce one's own (western) identity in opposition to the Other from the East, who is even more provincial than oneself, and finally – the entertainment warranted by the abundance of cheap alcohol.

The parodic dimension of Szczerek's narration becomes somehow diluted in Szkoła's texts: what remains is the exalted, overly emotional narrative of a tourist, who binges on gallons of beer (finding a willing companion in Joseph Roth, whose drinking – construed as a *Weltanschauung*, or even as a metaphysical stance – is alluded to on several occasions) and, above all, who may feel superior in the face of the poverty of his eastern neighbors. Such, for instance, are the blatantly patronizing judgments passed about the inhabitants of Pidkamin: “Here poverty blends into every single day, but the people – like in many other Galician villages – can cope with it quite well: without fireworks, but with dignity” (p. 98). Szkoła's words of praise for cities managing to deal with the crisis better and better – cities teeming with tourists and lively with young people – are similar in tone. It is so because it is not the state of the Ukrainian province that lies at the heart of the problem, but the writer's own position: the position of a tourist who comes to patronize the local people, starting with comments on their behaviors and finishing with their cuisine.

Visits to Jewish cemeteries, which often were sites of mass executions during the Second World War, turn out to be an important component of Szkoła's formula of tourism. Let us quote his descriptions of two such instances. In Brody,

<sup>18</sup> Such, for instance, is the author's representation of the checkpoint at the border crossing, where, instead of a grand history which he expected to see, Szkoła observes little more than “the toil of many beings” (p. 64) who only wish to “somehow settle down in a bit of comfort.” The author is also perturbed by the “space created by people solely for the utilitarian purpose of the moment” (p. 67).

<sup>19</sup> Z. SZCZEREK: *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian*. Kraków 2013.



the author ventures into a labyrinth of matzevahs and stumbles across “a mass grave, in which several thousand bodies of people executed by the Nazis in this very spot were buried” (p. 95). His ensuing reflection on being at a loss for words to describe the genocide is complemented with a quasi-tourist prompt: “one may come here to commune with the ghosts and the past, to be a passive witness of the disintegration” (p. 96). Szkoła does not come to the cemetery to look for any particular graves, or to connect the name on a tombstone to the body of a person familiar to him. His visit bears no traits of a pilgrimage, nor is it driven with family memories<sup>20</sup>; it is more of an attempt to seek out and explore sites conducive to what one could describe as metaphysical experience: an experience of non-mediated exposure to things falling apart, to destruction, to decay. And yet, even this metaphysical motivation of the author’s visit to the Jewish cemetery turns out to be rather feeble; the heat proves to offer a stronger one: “The sun shines mercilessly; standing among so many monuments to death becomes unbearable” (p. 95). A few lines further, the author continues: “So, standing in the middle of this graveyard, I warm my face in the sunshine and get a little impatient, because absolutely nothing happens” (p. 96). Even the allusion to Leopold Buczkowski’s novel *Czarny potok* (*Black Torrent*) – quoted in the epigraph to Szkoła’s essay – makes little difference here, regardless of the fact that Buczkowski’s narrative is replete with observations on the life in the cemetery, notes on the lives of the Jews in hiding, and reflections on the withering of life when the chances of finding a safe refuge in the space of conflicts of the Nazi occupation grow slim. But, when it is stripped of such meanings, devoid of senses intercepted from elsewhere, the cemetery, inevitably, must turn out to be a place where little happens – perhaps except for the revelation of the abstract decay, destruction, and oblivion.

The second cemetery, which the author (this time accompanied by the mysterious lady M) visits during his earlier excursion to Ukraine, is the Jewish cemetery in Buchach. The longer quote from Szkoła’s essay offers an account of the experience:

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<sup>20</sup> Such is the character of Tomasz Różycki’s poem “Spalone mapy” (The burned maps), whose opening verse reads “Pojechałem na Ukrainę” (“I went to Ukraine”). Różycki seeks traces of his relatives, asks questions about them – but the only response he receives is the silent expansion of nature. It is nature that the poet must experience in a close, bodily contact (he lies upon the ground), and it is with nature that he must talk. Yet, such a conversation does not involve ordinary words: its language is the language of an enchantment, to which “moles and earthworms” respond, and which affects nature: “I czułem, jak rośnie trawa ogromna, dzika wokół mojej głowy” (“And I felt the grass growing enormous, wild all around my head”). It is worth noting that the quest for the traces of the relatives, tantamount to the quest of history, ends in an act of coming to terms with nature, in nature reclaiming the graves. See T. RÓŻYCKI: *Kolonie*. Kraków 2006, p. 57.

On our way to the station we noticed a Jewish cemetery spreading on a low hillock to our left. Tired to the extreme, unable to find even an inch of a shade, we trudged along its alleys among all the matzevachs – and wherever we looked, vistas that we would have certainly appreciated more fully on a cooler day would open before us. Yet, balancing on the verge of exhaustion, we quickly came down from the hill, drained of strength or desire to scrutinize our surroundings any further. The world of the Jews of Buchach faded into oblivion – this whole multi-ethnic microworld dissolved entirely, melting away like our thoughts in the sun, yet it instilled in us a sense of melancholia, which somehow helps one to develop an understanding of the absurd movement of history, but also reminds one of that which is gone, and never to return. Ten minutes of walking in the sweltering heat was enough for the camera to start scorching my hands and enough for our senses to almost fall into darkness. Looking for a path leading down the hill, we wandered among the matzevachs, bumping into the edge of an abyss every time we lost our way. (p. 219)

Again, it is the heat that comes to the fore, along with the tourist's dizzying fatigue and the camera malfunction. The cemetery is withdrawn from the scope of the narrator's attention, becoming but another element contributing to the advent of the author's melancholia, which opens up ways to better understand the metaphysics of history.

This state, however, does not get in the way when the author, immediately thereafter, decides to go to a bar, which experience looms large in his powerful reminiscence: "All those dumplings, *vareniki* and *pelmeni*, homemade pizzas, all those kvasses and beers revolved in a mad dance before the very eyes of my soul [...]" (p. 220). Beer and other types of alcohol belong to the set of stock elements characterizing the narration of *Galicyjskie żywoty*, possibly serving the author as catalysts facilitating the attainment of the mental state which allows him to metaphysically experience finitude and destruction. It seems so, because the solitary wanderer of the Ukrainian province meticulously records all acts of alcohol drinking (even though he does not celebrate any special experiences, such as those of local alcohol tasting, concentrating more readily on his states of inebriation), and dedicates much space to the descriptions of the taxing sensation of the hangover. In such a context, commented upon equally often, the space of genocide – like the space of the mass graves in the vicinities of Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankovsk, or Berdychiv<sup>21</sup> – becomes little more than another

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<sup>21</sup> In Chernivtsi, the narrator gaze is directed to the North, "where there is a multitude of abandoned mass graves, and hundreds more of unmarked graves are to be found across the Prut" (p. 168). In Ivano-Frankovsk, the narrator sees "graves [...] everywhere – unmarked, forgotten, abandoned. Who was buried there? In the name of what?" (p. 187). In turn, while commenting upon the Berdychiv genocide, Szkoła refers to Kate BROWN's book *A Biography of No Place. From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*. He writes: "Dziesiątki tysięcy mogił skrywających ciała niewinnych ludzi i znaczących terytoria wielu ziem na tej planecie są tego dobrym przykładem."



trope allowing the author to confirm his already profound conviction of the nonsensicality of history.

What then is the essence of genocide in Szkoła's essays? Certainly, it is not about memory, although the author frequently complains about forgetting, about ousting death from the daily life. Nor is the knowledge of particular genocides the key to it. Like many authors manifesting strong tendencies towards the dark, gnostic metaphysics, Szkoła does not have enough patience to learn about historical fates of individual people, whose unique stories jointly amount to the overall history of mass extermination. Therefore, he skips over these stages of the process to pass straight to the metaphysics, to "seeing the essence." Yet, such a phenomenology often stops at aesthetics, at the vistas of the spaces of genocide, which – as was the case with the Jewish cemetery in Buchach – the graveyard *flâneur* is supposed to appreciate experiencing delight at the decay that the occasion of his visit incidentally allows him to notice (p. 224). Thus the Ukrainian space of genocide becomes an accidental complementation of the metaphysical nihilism, as it offers a perfect confirmation to a variety of convictions concerning evil, destruction, or nothingness that the writer has formed a priori.

### Genocide in Przemysław Dakowicz's Symbolism

A somewhat different approach to history is adopted by Przemysław Dakowicz. The author of *Afazja polska* focuses upon numerous historical documents, which he reads closely, although his goal is not to establish facts: these are already well-known. Instead, studying the documents, Dakowicz seeks to identify their symbolic content: events, characters, and scenes referring him to other meanings: death, the Shoah, the destruction of the Second Republic of Poland, and the ensuing acts of repressing – or silencing – Poland's own history.

Such symbolic content is to allow one to establish contact with the past – the past which not only was destroyed, but also – for many years – has been being positively forced out of the Polish collective memory. Dakowicz wishes to recall the history about which the Polish society is unable to talk (hence the category of *aphasia* in the title of his book), and he does this because he believes that

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A ile jeszcze jest miejsc nieoznaczonych, miejsc zapomnianych, trupów bez pochówku, o których nikt już nie pamięta. Zagłada to jedno, ale na tych ziemiach przecież dochodził jeszcze Wielki Głód..." ("Tens of thousands of graves enshrining bodies of innocent people and marking the territories in many lands on the face of the planet prove the point. And how many more such sites remain unmarked? How many forgotten? How many corpses, of whom no one remembers any more, have never been buried? The Shoah is one thing, but these lands also witnessed the Great Famine...") (p. 137).

learning to speak is the best remedy for the identity crisis and the confusion affecting the post-modern society. Dakowicz puts his plan to treat the Polish aphasia in effect mainly by analyzing various documents and historical studies, but at least in two situations he decides to visit the genocide space in person.

The first situation is connected to the crimes against the Polish intelligentsia of the Gdańsk Pomerania, perpetrated in the fall of 1939 in consequence of the implementation of the policy of the forced Germanization in the region – crimes, which seem not to have been etched too deeply into the collective memory of the Poles. On the basis of a variety of documents, the essayist creates a sketch dedicated to the mass execution in Piaśnica, where the bodies of the shot victims had been buried in a mass grave. At the end of the war, they were unearthed again in order to be cremated; the remaining bones were to be pulverized.<sup>22</sup> These actions were designed to obliterate any traces of the genocide. In 1946, however, immediately after the war, exhumations were carried out, as a result of which it was possible to identify some of the victims.

The writer delves into this historical event in search of possible scenes or symbolic configurations which would lend themselves to being read as a message for the present. Therefore, he looks for specifics with the view to imagining a crime perpetrated on several thousand representatives of Polish intelligentsia. This is why he meticulously “scrutinizes every vestige, every fragment, and every detail under the microscope of memory.”<sup>23</sup> He provides such a meaningful detail in his description of a mother and a baby nestled in each other in the mass grave. The writer interprets this piece of information as “the *pietà* of Piaśnica,” a symbolic icon of the closeness of the mother and her child, this time, in a dual sacrifice.

The reconstructions of tangible historical facts and the quest for symbols are to serve as a defense against historiosophic nihilism, in the light of which position “the past is an illusion. A great vacuum devoid of form and content. A ridiculous, hollow, inconceivable nothing.”<sup>24</sup> The essayist juxtaposes the annihilating power of history with “an individual memory, a detail, over which the morbid imagination will not cicatrize, a painful snippet of reality.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in Dakowicz’s prose, the memory of genocide follows a particular direction: it is the memory of one’s own scars, one’s own suffering, one’s own wounds that may never heal because it is upon these scars and these open wounds that the national identity is to be rebuilt. One’s symbolic fusion with the past should also protect the Poles against – or, in fact, separate them from – the Germans. While describing mass graves, Dakowicz asks: “What is it that they say about

<sup>22</sup> The task was carried out by the prisoners of the concentration camp in Stutthof. Importantly, Dakowicz fails to pay any attention to the identity of the prisoners, or even to the fact of the camp’s existence. See P. DAKOWICZ: *Afazja polska 2*. Warszawa 2016, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

you, our German neighbors, and what is it that they say about us? If the grave is a metaphor of our common past, what testimony does it give to that history?”<sup>26</sup> The author looks for metaphors and symbols that have the power of bringing about the national unity, while, at the same time, allowing the nation to conceive of itself as separate from other nations and their own suffering.

The narratives of the Pomeranian genocide are complemented with the description of the crime perpetrated in Pelplin, the so called Pelplin Autumn. In this case, Dakowicz manages to visit the described space in person. He offers his reader a detailed account of his journey and of the meeting with his guide in the Pomeranian town of Pelplin, paying particular attention to the description of the building of the higher theological seminary, where the Germans would detain individuals deemed to be the opponents of the new regime in 1939. Courtesy of the director of the Pelplin seminary, the writer gains the opportunity to spend a night “within the walls that remember the last war perfectly well.”<sup>27</sup> He also visits prison cells in the cellars of the abode, but wishes to see them “in the evening, when no one would wander around the corridors.”<sup>28</sup> Thanks to these efforts, Dakowicz receives a special space to imagine genocide. Let us quote his account of this experience: “I am standing in a narrow basement corridor, just past eleven o’clock, fluorescent lamps work quietly, their cold light is like an investigator’s gaze – he combs the area, revealing every flexure, looking into the farthest corner, exposing the curvatures of the walls and cracks in the floor.”<sup>29</sup> And then, having quoted some historical data, he continues:

I start along the row of doors hewn into the left wall of the basement corridor. One of them is open; inside, a motor propelling some machine is running at high revolutions. Through the smoky pane of a narrow window the diluted, pale moonlight flows inside. Outside the window, enwrapped in a plethora of the shades of gray, the old Cistercian courtyard dozes off.

Returning to the corridor, I am suddenly overcome with irrational angst. I put my ear to the cold wall and hold my breath, as if I expected to fish out the moans, sighs, and calls that fell silent long ago from among the noises of the night – as if I believed that the matters of today and the matters of the past could fuse into one. Can you hear us? We have come for you: I, the writer of these words, and those who follow my inept account. We keep standing in this cursed corridor to keep you up, to smash the doors, to cut the padlocks, break the deadbolts. Can you hear us?<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 222.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 223.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, pp. 226–227.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 228.



This is the most important record of the impressions of the author's journey to Pelplin. On the following day, the writer and his guide fail to find the path leading to one of the execution sites, which the writer interprets as a sign, a symbol of history, in which nothing is beyond doubt, in which any certitude gets lost in the multitude of unlike versions and possibilities.<sup>31</sup> Dakowicz replaces this cognitive uncertainty with the certitude of the lived experience of his presence in the space of genocide, where – owing to the power of his imagination – the author gets the feeling that he can hear the voices of the long dead victims, and where it is possible to establish some sort of a make-believe rapport with them, to build a unity, a community. This community is affective in character: it is based on anxiety which Dakowicz experiences alone, confronting the loneliness of the inmates (once) held in the prison cells.

The above notwithstanding, Dakowicz's symbolic project manifests itself most fully when he writes about Łączka – about the graves of the victims of Stalinism and about the process of the exhumation and identification of their bodies. To these experiences the writer dedicates a book of poems<sup>32</sup> as well as a series of essays and diary entries collected in the volume *Kwaterna zmartwychwstałej pamięci*.<sup>33</sup> Unlike before, however, rather than work with historical documents, this time Dakowicz volunteers to actively participate in the field research carried out by archeologists working in the cemetery.<sup>34</sup>

The space of open graves becomes the locus of the writer's immediate experience of human remains, which lend themselves to a variety of symbolic interpretations. Above all, however, essential to the process is his direct exposure to the human corpse, or to what is left of it. Dead bodies, which Dakowicz so frequently describes in his other essays solely on the basis of his reading and his imagination, now receive the legitimization of the author's tangible experience of the non-discursive real. The writer notes: "I am looking into the grave pit. The body was thrown into it face down"<sup>35</sup> – and immediately goes on to the description of the positioning of the corpse and of its physical appearance, in which he discerns a gesture of remonstrance – "as if it were not inert, or rather – on the contrary: as if it were alive, active, protesting. As if the dead man wanted to rise again and return to the world of the living. And he does." The work of

<sup>31</sup> Among others, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's "methodological" proposition based on the multidimensional confrontations of a variety of accounts, of which each offers a valuable perspective, may provide an inspiration to approach the knowledge of the past in this way. Cf. J.M. RYMKIEWICZ: *Kinderszenen*. Warszawa 2008, pp. 27–36.

<sup>32</sup> P. DAKOWICZ: *Łączka*. Kraków 2013.

<sup>33</sup> P. DAKOWICZ: *Kwaterna zmartwychwstałej pamięci*. Warszawa 2017.

<sup>34</sup> For more extensive information concerning exhumations, not only those carried out in Łączka, see E. DOMAŃSKA: *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała*. Warszawa 2017, p. 179.

<sup>35</sup> P. DAKOWICZ: *Afazja polska*. Warszawa 2015, p. 317.

archeologists supported by volunteers is to make the return of the dead possible; it is to allow them to assume their rightful place in the real, physical space (for instance, on the pedestals) and in the nation's symbolic space. Exhumation thus ceases to be a mere element of standard research or forensic practice, becoming a component of the national sacrum. Even the position of archeologists at work – who perform their tasks kneeling – seems to coincide with typical gestures of homage or prayer. And the writer himself feels best while shoveling away – in the heat, exposed to burning sun – when he becomes a cog in a mechanism working towards the recuperation of the collective memory and identity. This “swing of a shovel” is treated as “an interference in the supraindividual semantic order, in the structure of our common imagination.”<sup>36</sup> Dakowicz thus works in an “inconceivable unity with the living and the dead”<sup>37</sup> – a unity based on the common descent into an open grave. Interestingly, this new community is based on silence, on the physical co-presence rather than on a dialog, even though the visits paid to the site by a variety of people – including the descendants of the victims – offer opportunities for a conversation. The community is then established in a somewhat roundabout way: it happens by means of an individual contact with the remains of the dead and through the silent co-presence of the living. It is, thus, not a community constituted in the space of the relations formed among the living members of the society, but one mediated by one's individual relation to the corpses, to what is left of the bodies of the victims of genocide who experience a rebirth when “the earth, split in a Caesarean section, unveils the remains of the dead.”<sup>38</sup> It is of these remains, “of the broken bone, that it is possible to create anew a nation that would be one,”<sup>39</sup> Dakowicz rhetorically asserts.

Perhaps nowhere is the symbolic path towards the construction of a new national identity more fully realized than in the cemetery, in space in which it is possible to experience the physical traces of genocide – traces that situate each member of the projected community in an individual, solitary relation to the inconceivable, incomprehensible, irrational crime, whose victims were his or her own people. The new community, the new nation, is then a community of those who have entered into contact with the dead, experiencing both the affective and the symbolic union with them. Owing to this, side by side with others who share their experience, they are capable of building a new identity: an identity cured of the ignorance, into which many were forced by two subsequent totalitarisms.

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<sup>36</sup> P. DAKOWICZ: *Kwaterna zmartwychwstałej pamięci...*, p. 256.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 261.

<sup>38</sup> P. DAKOWICZ: *Afazja polska...*, p. 318.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 336.



## Conclusions

The discussed essays by Szkoła and by Dakowicz illustrate two modes of employing genocide for the purpose of the articulation of one's political and historiosophic views. Both authors strongly emphasize the need of memory, which sentiment manifests itself in frequently voiced complaints about the state of the run-down cemeteries, unmarked sites of genocide, or events that yet need to be properly acknowledged and adequately commemorated. At the fundament of such a position lies the demand that space be filled with memory, its signs and testimonies, as well as with evidence of present-day care about the perpetuation of this memory.

Among the most important traits of genocide literature is the presence of spatial distance: speaking of genocides frequently requires assuming a position characterized with a degree of remoteness, which makes it possible to shift genocide from one's immediate vicinity further away, into alien, far-off regions. Perhaps this is the reason why associating genocide exclusively with particular sites – as if it were possible to lock the mass crime within them and thereby to decontaminate the space outside of them or save it from stigmatization – is so convenient for those involved with the discourses of genocide.

Szkoła and Dakowicz, likewise, focus on spaces located away from their hometowns. In such a context, Szkoła's Wrocław<sup>40</sup> and Dakowicz's Łódź<sup>41</sup> become the loci of the commonplace, in which nothing extraordinary ever happens and, in fact, where nothing unusual has ever happened; the spaces of both cities seem familiar, even tame.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, both writers' respective reflections concern other places. In his essays, Szkoła reminds the readers of global histories (alluding to the genocides in Mexico and Congo), but dedicates most of his attention to Ukraine – especially to the Eastern Galicia and to Bukovina. Dakowicz, in turn, focuses his reading upon the Borderlands of the Second Republic of Poland, upon the turning points in the history of Warsaw, and upon genocide in the region of Pomerania. If we acknowledge the tension between memory and space, an interesting pattern may present itself to us in the context of the studied passages. Both authors strive towards the memorialization of the spaces that they themselves do not inhabit,

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<sup>40</sup> Szkoła, for instance, remembers his stay in hospital, and reminisces on local drunks, who prove quite similar to those encountered in Ukraine.

<sup>41</sup> In Dakowicz's view, the Łódź of today and the Grodno, Warszawa, Vilnius, or Lviv of old are two "different worlds." A connection between them, their contiguity, is extremely hard to attain, if not altogether impossible (see P. DAKOWICZ: *Afazja 2...*, p. 10).

<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that both cities could become – and would often be – the objects of a similar description. Therefore, spatial distance and the journey itself appear – in these cases – all the more important.

spaces into which they venture only for a short while in order to find evidence confirming the solidity of grounds of their ideologies or historiosophies.

The second element that Dakowicz's and Szkoła's respective writings have in common is the emphasis upon the individual, solitary perspective of the observer. Both authors tend to travel alone, and even if they are accompanied by another person or when they travel in a group, they both impose some limits upon the dialog, reducing it to the bare minimum in order to observe the reality and objects within it and to describe their own experiences thereto related without disturbance. This leads to the rise of the masculine melancholia, whose power, in Szkoła's case, is reinforced with beer, and in Dakowicz's – with the affective experiencing of the contact with various artefacts, including the physical proximity to human remains and the close analysis of historical documents.

Much more important than historical, sociological, or politological knowledge about genocides<sup>43</sup> are other factors: an extreme example, an anecdote colored with the uncanny, emanating horror, sometimes causing revulsion.<sup>44</sup> The aesthetics of images powerfully engaging the reader is then elevated over the actual acquisition of knowledge about genocide. Confronting the crimes perpetrated throughout history, time and again the solitary subject confirms his realization of the insufficiency of language and the inefficiency of reason.<sup>45</sup> Every now and then he must go silent; every now and then he suffers from vertigo that brings him to the verge of fainting, sometimes due to excessive heat, but more often due to the excess of history. Dakowicz resolves his crises with a prayer; Szkoła – resorts to the nearest bar.

The third plane upon which both authors come closer together is that of metaphysics and historiosophy. Szkoła markedly emphasizes his historical nihilism, and the noun that most often seems to perform the function of the subject of his sentences is "history." In the essayist's diction, history "mocks," "hides," "abandons," "strikes," or even "leads to a catastrophe." Yet, his repeated use of

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<sup>43</sup> Both authors, of course, quote a plethora of historical examples. It must be stressed, however, that these examples do not serve the purpose of expanding the knowledge about the phenomenon or facilitating its understanding (interestingly, both essayists consider scientific and scholarly explanations too simplistic and too scanty). The objective of the introduction of such examples is the shock caused by their extreme brutality or forcefulness.

<sup>44</sup> Dakowicz emphasizes that "it is not about [...] an unhealthy fascination with death. It is the symbolic potential of it that I find significant" (P. DAKOWICZ: *Afazja 2...*, p. 49). Yet, in his prose, it is the macabre scenes of meticulously described death that seem to carry the symbolic potential of which he writes.

<sup>45</sup> An example of Szkoła's comment concerning the events in Chernivtsi: "The scale of this drama is inconceivable to a human mind, and seeking consolation in the thought that some time, sooner or later, no trace of these events will remain and the ultimate nothing will set in is indeed beyond most of us" (D. SZKOŁA: *Galicyjskie żywoty...*, p. 155). Szkoła's topoi of helplessness create an effect of a massive burden – both cognitive and aesthetic – which the presented events or spaces carry with them.

this abstract term leads to the abjuration of the diagnosis of the multifaceted history of a multicultural society, or the complex motivations of individuals acting throughout history. Such complexities are ignored for the sake of a clearer manifestation of the assumptive image of history as a nonsensical sequence of murders, and of the mundane present as “ordinary life in its purest form, which goes on in local towns and villages where the typically human fate is visible plain as day” (p. 92). Oftentimes, Szkoła’s observations allow one to solely conclude that “not much is going on” there. No one knows, however, what could this “special something” that should be happening be, especially if the author himself chooses not to participate in events or rites involving people whom he observes in action.

Dakowicz borders on a similar form of nihilism. Also his fascinations with history render it a chain of violent deaths and bloody murders, a gallery of mutilated bodies, and bodies demeaned as a result of a crime. Yet, he fends off this nihilistic vision by engaging the past with the present-day national and political conflicts. It is so because it is in the changing status of the victim of a historical crime (or treason) that Dakowicz sees the chance to define the Polish national identity anew, to rebuilt this identity on the basis of the symbolic unity between the past victims and the present-day subjects of affective memory.

The essays analyzed in this article showcase a rather complex mode of the employment of knowledge about genocide in the process of creating individual memory-oriented or historiosophic programs. The paramount importance which contemporary culture (especially in Poland) attributes to genocides and to genocide research is the reason why historical mass exterminations have become important building blocks of a variety of narrations. The above notwithstanding, it is important to observe that, in principle, such narratives do not aspire towards the simple goal of memorializing events or helping to understand the processes that lead to them. Instead, they oscillate towards a variety of other discourses (such as those of tourism, politics, affect, etc.<sup>46</sup>), even though it seems clear that responsible genocide studies should be built upon the fundament of solid critical research on the instrumentalization of knowledge about genocides, which, in general, is practiced in cultural texts, and – in particular – manifests itself in essays and other texts of popular culture.

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<sup>46</sup> On ideological aspects of different formulas of literary tourism, see also: J. WIERZEJSKA, D. SOSNOWSKA, A. MOLISAK (eds.): *Turystyka i polityka. Ideologie współczesnych opowieści o przestrzeniach*. Warszawa 2017.



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### Samotny mężczyzna w przestrzeni ludobójstwa

**ABSTRAKT:** W artykule omawiam pojawiającą się we współczesnych narracjach o ludobójstwie strukturę narracyjną opartą na wyraźnej obecności pierwszoosobowego narratora, najczęściej męskiego, opisującego swoje przeżycia i przemyślenia w czasie podróży do miejsc masowych zbrodni. Odwołuję się do badań nad powiązaniem przestrzeni i pamięci, geokrytyki, dzięki czemu rozróżniam kilka poziomów analizowanych tekstów zmierzających w stronę metafizycznych uogólnień o charakterze nihilistycznym lub patriotycznym. Zaproponowane kategorie analityczne wykorzystuję w badaniu fragmentów eseistyki Dawida Szkoły i Przemysława Dakowicza.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** ludobójstwa, turystyka historyczna, Zagłada, polityka historyczna, esej, reportaż, geopoetyka

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